

have served their country. They are the greatest generation ever. But this action comes on top of eliminating the earnings test, which was a \$22 billion proposal over 10. I voted for that. There were 100 of us on this floor who voted for that. It was a reasonable thing to do. But if you look at the diminishing amount of money we invest every single year through our appropriations accounts, and you look at that trend continuing to go further and further down, it gets harder and harder to say we are endowing our future the way our parents endowed the future for us.

Mr. President, I did not want anybody to suffer the illusion that I do not care about our military retirees. I do. There were good fiscal reasons why not to support the amendment, but I hope as we go into conference we do not get lulled into thinking the only thing we have to do to recruit and retain people in our Armed Forces is to provide some pecuniary reimbursement that enables them to feel they are getting rewarded in some way that is competitive with what they can get in the marketplace. I yield the floor.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I am glad to hear the Senator's statement. I inform my friend, I spent a substantial portion of the day discussing how to meet the problems associated with the feelings of so many people in the military that there were, in fact, substantial commitments made that lead on into the future as enormous costs as compared to the costs of the past.

We need to have a commission of some kind. I hope after the Senator steps down from this body that he might see fit to be one who will help take on the task of defining the commitments that were made and how we fulfill them. I say that because in the past, many of those benefits were paid out of the Veterans Affairs Department from veterans benefits. They are now coming from the Defense funds, and if they grow at the rate it appears they are going to grow, they are going to seriously hamper our ability to modernize our force and our systems and defend our country as it must be in this century.

Mr. KERREY. Mr. President, I appreciate the comments. There is no question that should be a very big concern of the conferees because Senator WARNER yesterday, when we were debating this issue, expressed his understanding that this would increase the requirement to build additional military hospitals and military health care facilities. This will shift the burden of paying for health care from Medicare over to the Defense budget.

There is no question that is the case. I say to the Senator, I remember talking to my recruiter very well. I remember the day I sat in front of a Navy recruiter and he said to me: Join the Navy; see the world. He made all kinds of promises to me. I have not sued my Government because they did not give me a chance to see the world.

I believe the Senator is right. There were some legitimate written promises

made, and if there were legitimate written promises that were made, then we ought to make certain we keep those commitments.

Sometimes it becomes much more a political rhetoric than it becomes reality. I do think, whether it is a veteran or whether it is some other American, one of the hardest things for us to do when somebody asks us for something is to say no. The Senator from Alaska has had to do that many times in his career in the Senate. "I want some of the taxpayers' money to do something" and the Senator has had to repeatedly say no.

It is not easy to do that. It is too easy for us to get caught up, when we talk about making sure we take care of our retirees, in the feeling that you just cannot say no.

I argue that the answer is you can say no, and there are times you need to say no. If you do not say no, it is going to be difficult for us to keep our force modernized and weapons systems modernized and our people who are in the services well paid.

Again, I say to my friend, the thing I fear—and I will say it directly—is we have a declining number of people who have been in the services in the Congress. I am very much aware it is easy to say: Gee, I have to do this; I wasn't in the service, I have to do this.

I had to say I did not join the Navy because they promised me health care benefits, retirement benefits, and promised me I could go to school on the GI bill. That was not the contract. It was all there.

People say: We owe you. No. I have a bigger debt to my country than my country has to me. It is a very important attitude for us to instill not just in our young people but retirees as well. We have to be very careful that in doing something we do not undercut the most important reason men and women come into the Armed Forces. We ought to praise them. We ought to recognize that and not forget it is still a very big reason people serve.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, again I thank the Senator. His statement reflects the comments I made in the meetings today. I do hope we can address this subject. I find it odd that many of the people who are raising the issues and talking about the commitments that were made in the war in which Senator INOUE and I served were not alive then, but they are telling us what the commitments were. We ought to make certain we fulfill all of those commitments, but we have to have a definition of what they really were.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, for the leader, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate now proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators being permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

BACKGROUND CHECKS IN 1999

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, last week-end, a new report was released by the Justice Department about the successes of the Brady Law. The Brady Law requires that a prospective gun purchaser undergo a criminal background check before obtaining any firearm from a federal firearms licensee. The law is intended to prevent felons, fugitives, domestic abusers, and other prohibited persons from gaining access to guns. The new information brought the number of purchase rejections up to more than half a million since enactment of the Brady Law in 1994.

According to the report, the number one reason for rejection was because the applicant either had a felony conviction or was under felony indictment. Of the approximately 200,000 purchase rejections in 1999, almost three-quarters, or 150,000 were denied for this reason. The second most common cause for rejection was a domestic violence misdemeanor conviction or restraining order, accounting for approximately 13% of rejections or 27,000 applications. Other applicants were denied the ability to purchase guns because of fugitive status, mental illness or disability, drug addiction, or state or local prohibition. In total, in 1999 alone, the Brady Law kept more than 200,000 guns off the streets and out of the hands of prohibited purchasers.

The Brady Act has been effective but its success has been undermined by a loophole in the law that allows criminals to purchase guns from non-licensed sellers. That loophole allows felons, fugitives or other prohibited persons to purchase guns at gun shows without undergoing background checks. It is a loophole often exploited by those with objectionable backgrounds, some of whose applications have already been rejected by federal, state, or local law enforcement agencies.

Congress made significant strides to reduce the level of gun violence by enacting the Brady Act, but now it's time to finish the job. Congress must close the gunshow loophole, otherwise the successes of Brady are weakened. As a reporter in my home state of Michigan said yesterday, "the same statistics that demonstrate the usefulness of the background checks that have been in place since passage of the Brady bill cry out for closure of the loopholes that allow criminals turned away by licensed dealers to purchase guns with impunity elsewhere."

I urge Congress to close the gun show loophole and stop undermining law enforcement's ability to keep guns off the